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ABSTRACT

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the greatest of the Romantic-era poets, has much to say to the students of today. Throughout his life he struggled with physical and emotional illness, drug and sometimes alcohol abuse. Despite his problems, he managed to write meaningful works. Coleridge is best known for his epic poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"; however, two of his other works, "Christabel" and "Frost at Midnight," also merit attention. "Christabel," which was never finished to Coleridge's satisfaction, is the story of a father-daughter-mysterious woman triangle. "Frost at Midnight" is a short elegaic monologue to Coleridge's infant son. Both poems deal with certain aspects of the supernatural, and in both poems Coleridge proves his skill at mixing the mundane and the magical. One critic has said that Coleridge's best poetry is "occasional or fragmentary," but that it "succeeds in more modes than most poets have attempted," (I. A. Richards). (Fifteen notes are included.) (PA)

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# Samuel Taylor Coleridge: **Christabel** And **Frost At Midnight**

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge is a Romantic-era poet who has much to say to the students of today, both in his writings and in his life. All throughout his life, he struggled with physical and emotional illness. He was a drug-user and sometimes abused alcohol. No matter how grave his problems, however, he continued to write meaningful works. He could serve as an example of determination in the face of adversity.

## I. The Writer

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is thought by many to be one of the greatest (if not the greatest) Romantic-era poets of that time. He is perhaps best known for his epic poem of supernatural horror and redemption, **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**. His other works have been unsurprisingly overshadowed by this piece.

Unbeknownst to many laymen and to a small portion of the scholarly crowd, he has a veritable treasure-trove of work equally as good as **Rime**, if not better. In order to better understand the author and his motivations for writing, it is necessary to give a basic overview of his life and his writing career.

Coleridge was born on October 21, 1772, in the small farming town of Ottery St. Mary. His father was John Coleridge, a local vicar who had studied at Cambridge, and had little sense of ambition for any of his ten children. An interesting discrepancy in the size of the family exists; in another source, the Coleridge brood is made up of fourteen children. (1) His mother, who is never named in any of the texts I consulted, was by all accounts a driven and very practical woman. Samuel was a creditable student in his early days, and when his father died when Coleridge had just turned fourteen, he was sent to Christ's Hospital, a school, where he stayed until 1791. (2)

He then went to Jesus College on a grant, and made passable grades for two years. In 1793, for reasons that are never given, he gave up, went to London, and got very drunk. While intoxicated he enlisted in the 15th Light Dragoons under the pseudonym of Silas Tomkyns Comberbache. After two months of service, he was bailed out by George Coleridge, his parson-brother, on the grounds of alleged insanity.

In late 1794, he attempted his first serious poem in the open (ode) form, 'Monody on the Death of Thomas Chatterton.' December of the same year found him publishing his first collection of works, 'Sonnets on Eminent Characters.' They were greeted with quite a bit of attention. (3)

His collaboration with William Wordsworth did not begin until 1797; the two poets had heard of each other through a publisher they both knew. For the remainder of 1797 and into the spring of 1798, they talked and wrote together. The shared ideas of the two writers resulted in the foundations for **Lyrical Bal-**

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**lads**. The basic agreement would have Wordsworth writing about mundane life and normal characters, whereas Coleridge would turn the attention of his writing to the supernatural side. (4)

The result was four ballads begun in September 1797 and April of 1798. They were **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**, **Christabel**, The Three Graves, and The Ballad of the Dark Ladie. Of these four, only **Rime** was ever finished. He also wrote another poem, **Frost At Midnight** in February 1798, and published in the same year. He journeyed to Germany in September of 1798, and did not return to England until 1799. His publication of **Lyrical Ballads** had gained Coleridge some notoriety. Because of this, the pressure was on Coleridge to produce new and equally good work as a result of his extensive tour of Germany. He took on far too many contractual obligations, many of which failed miserably. The major successes were notable, however--he had over fifty articles published in the Morning Post from 1799 to 1800. He also wrote a second part of **Christabel**, but the ballad was never completed, at least not to Coleridge's satisfaction. (5)

## II. **Christabel**

**Christabel** was written in two parts, the first in 1797, and the second between the years of 1800 and 1801. It was published in May of 1816 in a collection entitled **Christabel and other Poems**. The reason for the delay from beginning to publication was never given by Coleridge, although many believe that his poor state of health and his addiction to painkillers were a large factor. **Christabel** is perhaps Coleridge's best-known work aside from **Rime**, but not a great deal has been written about it. It is the opinion of some critics that if Coleridge had revised some portions of the poem, **Christabel** and not **Rime** would be the poet's lasting contribution to the world of literature. (6)

The story itself is a trifle confusing when being read for the first time. The main character is, of course, Christabel, who is a maiden residing in a castle with her father, Sir Leoline, a baron.

Christabel is anticipating marrying her beloved, and she has snuck out of the castle to pray in the forest for his well-being. Her prayers are interrupted when she hears a moan, and encounters this strange and beautiful lady, Geraldine.

Christabel, whose mother died at her birth, takes Geraldine back to the castle. The two lie down to sleep (some type of physical encounter occurs), and upon waking, Christabel escorts Geraldine into the presence of Sir Leoline. As it turns out, Geraldine is the daughter of an ex-friend of Sir Leoline's. The baron becomes filled with anger after he hears Geraldine's tale of being assaulted by her father's troops. After proclaiming that the attackers will be exposed for the animals they are, Christabel catches a glimpse of Geraldine looking at her with the eyes of a snake:

"A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy;
And the lady eyes they shrank in her head,
Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye,
And with somewhat malice, and more of dread,
At Christabel she looked askance!-
One moment-and the sight was fled!
But Christabel in a dizzy trance
Stumbling on the unsteady ground
Shuddered aloud, with a hissing sound;
And Geraldine again turned round
And like a thing, that sought relief
Full of wonder, and full of grief,
She rolled her large bright eyes divine
Wildly on Sir Leoline." (7)

When Christabel begs Sir Leoline to send Geraldine away, he chooses Geraldine over his daughter. Whether this was Geraldine's intention from the start is never clearly stated, but it is one of the more logical and possible inferences that could be made.

Paglia considers **Christabel** to be "a splendid case study of the imagination and morality. . .we follow a great poet into his excess of daemonic vision and then out again into the social realm of humane good wishes, where the visionary is beset by doubt, anxiety, and guilt. **Christabel** shows the birth of poetry in evil, hostility, and crime." (8)

Although Coleridge is not specific, some type of physical act occurs between Christabel and Geraldine when they are in Christabel's sleeping chamber.

In my interpretation of the poem, Christabel symbolizes innocence and the drive to help those in need. Geraldine appears to have almost mystical powers of hypnotism. Whether this ability to fascinate is a spell, or perhaps as a vampiric power as maintained Paglia, is uncertain. "Extremes meet in **Christabel**: vice and virtue, male and female, nature and society." (9)

There are many possibilities regarding Geraldine's true nature: she might be a witch, a succubus, a vampire, a siren, or any other supernatural entity.

The ramifications of the vision had by Bracy, the bard, only reinforces these notions:

"And in my dream methought I went
To search out what might there be found;
And what the sweet bird's trouble meant,
That thus lay fluttering on the ground.
I went and peered, and could descry
No cause for her distressful cry;
But yet for her dear lady's sake
I stooped, methought, the dove to take,
When lo! I saw a bright green snake
Coiled around its wings and neck.
Green as the herbs on which it couched,
Close by the dove's head it crouched;

And with the dove it heaves and stirs,
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!" (10)

To me, the meaning is clear; the dove is Christabel, and the snake is Geraldine. Geraldine has bespelled Christabel, as seen by the serpent coiled about the bird. And as the snake chokes the dove, Christabel's will grows weaker.

The similarities between **Christabel** and **Rime** are striking. Both poems deal with certain aspects of the supernatural; **Rime** is a comparative study in crucifixion and redemption from sin. A secondary, but no less important conflict, is the basic concept of good versus evil. **Christabel** takes a simpler view on the struggle of good versus evil, and unlike **Rime**, evil scores a victory when the enraptured Sir Leoline orders Christabel to leave his sight, never to return.

## III. **Frost At Midnight**

**Frost At Midnight**, as mentioned earlier, was produced in one of Coleridge's writing frenzies that lasted from 1797 until 1801. The work is unusual in several respects; first, it does not conform with Coleridge's pattern of the supernatural as subject material. Second, it is a peaceful work, with no mention of any sort of struggle going on.

It is plain that at the time it was written, Coleridge was feeling rather melancholy but more or less content. The poem is an ode to the feelings that Coleridge has when he sees his son Hartley. **Frost** is also a stunning work in terms of the evocative images of nature that Coleridge invokes:

"The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud-and hark, again! loud as before."

Coleridge also describes the house when all of its occupants save for him are asleep. Coleridge is apparently gazing out a window with his son nestled by his side. He muses on the baby's unconcerned sleep, and the world around him. He tells of the only sound in the cabin, the sputtering of a flame in the low fire in his hearth. The sound complements the silence, Coleridge observes in his poem:

". . . the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form. . ."

He then reflects on his own childhood, and remembers his birthplace, Ottery St. Mary. He recalls the sounds of the bells from the church tower, and many other things.

Coleridge brings himself back to the present, and reflects once more on his sleeping son, and of the wonders that await him

as he grows up. He thinks of the places Hartley will go, and the things he will see; Coleridge's tone borders on wistful nostalgia in these stanzas. He silently urges his son to accept what God will show him in this life, and to appreciate it and all the world has to offer. The final verse, if anything, doubles the poem's impact with its combination of description and promise to his son:

> "Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
> Whether the summer clothe the general earth
> With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
> Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
> Of mossy apple tree, while the nigh thatch
> Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
> Heard only in the traces of the blast,
> Or if the secret ministry of frost
> Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
> Quietly shining to the quiet Moon." (11)

In **Frost**, Coleridge proves beyond a doubt that he can write equally well about the mundane or the magical. The main appeal of **Frost** to a reader is its rich prose that describes a forest in its seasonal guises, and for the tender feeling that Coleridge obviously had for his son. Indeed, there is perhaps no more effective contrast to **Rime** or **Christabel** than **Frost**; the inherent violence and struggle in the former are seen not at all in the latter.

Whether Coleridge deserves his place in history as a great poet and thinker is open for debate. No one would argue, however, that he had masterful command of language and imagery in whatever form of writing he set his hand to.

## IV. The Later Years

The list of Coleridge's great works should by no means be limited to the pieces discussed or referred to in this paper. Some of his other poems were produced in the same time frame. **Kubla Khan**, for instance, was written in 1797. The fifty-four-line fragment is one of his better-known works despite the fact it was never finished. In my high school literature class, a number of the students made the comment that **Kubla** could have been written by anyone who had ever taken LSD. They were surprised to find out that they were not far from the truth. Coleridge admitted later that he had written **Kubla** under the influence of ". . . two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery. . ." The reason that the poem was never finished was because a friend disturbed Coleridge from his writing, and they talked for an hour. When Coleridge returned to his work, the opium had nearly worn off, and with it, the inspiration for **Kubla Khan**.

He developed rheumatism, which is one of the many reasons besides recreational use, that he took opium for. He continued writing, but he already seemed to have passed his peak. As his

opium addiction increased, so too did his drinking along with bouts of depression. Any writer would find it difficult to work under these circumstances, and Coleridge was no exception.

Wandering aimlessly around England, and later on in Europe, Coleridge broke contact with the Wordsworths, his wife, and many of his other friends. He was constantly beset by hallucinations, depression, and hysteria. (12)

Finally recovering from these problems in 1814 after being treated for addiction and suicidal ideation at a hospital in Bristol, he moved in with the Morgan family, long-time friends of his. He began working on a complete collection of his works to be called **Sibylline Leaves**, which was taken from the prophecies made by a mysterious priestess of Apollo. When he began a preface to **Sibylline**, his ideas exploded. He had no other choice but to begin dictating things to his friend Morgan from his own memory. Eventually, this became Coleridge's own autobiography, **Biographia Literaria**, that came to be centered around three central ideas:

1. His search for a 'dynamic' philosophy.
2. His collaborations with Wordsworth.
3. His own theories on Romantic-era poetry.

After this, his work tapers off, only to begin once more in the last few years of his life. In February 1825, he wrote 'Work Without Hope.' (13)

In 1830, he published his last great work. The monograph was entitled **On the Constitution of the Church and State**. At this time, Coleridge was fifty-eight years of age, but by all accounts looked much older. On July 25, 1834, Samuel Taylor Coleridge died of a heart attack. It is ironic that he knew the end was near; in his last hours, doctors treated him with arrowmint and laudanum (opium resin) to ease his pain. It was the drug that possibly prevented him from being a even more prolific writer than he was that saw him out of this world, and into the next. (14)

I. A. Richards said this of Coleridge: ". . . his best poetry is occasional or fragmentary. Apart from **The Ancient Mariner**, if even that is, or could be, really finished, he has no completed poems to match his fragments. . . His poetry succeeds in more modes than most poets have attempted." (15)

One has to wonder if Coleridge would be considered more or less successful if he had more completed works than fragments.

## V. Footnotes

1. David Daiches, et. al. "Samuel Taylor Coleridge." **English Literature**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965, p. 425.

2. Richard Holmes. **Coleridge**. Oxford: Univ. Press, 1982, p. 2.

3. Ibid., p. 5.

4. Ibid., pp. 9-10.

5. John Colmer, Ed. **Coleridge: Selected Poems**. Oxford: University Press, 1967, pp. 139-40.

6. Ibid., pp. 113-36.

7. Ibid., p. 133.

8. Camille Paglia. **Sexual Personae**. New York: Random House, 1990, p. 317.

9. Ibid., pp. 334-339.

10. Colmer, pp. 131-32.

11. James E. Miller, Jr., et. al. **England In Literature**. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1976, pp. 353-54.

12. Holmes, pp. 13-31.

13. Ibid., pp. 35-44.

14. Ibid., pp. 45-46.

15. I. A. Richards. In Coburn, Kathleen, Ed. **Coleridge: A Collection of Critical Essays**. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967, pp. 26-27.

## VI. Works Also Consulted

Pooley, Robert C., et. al. **England In Literature**. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1963.

Watson, George. **Coleridge The Poet**. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

## VII. Acknowledgements

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